Creation story 1 – Benin

There is very little written evidence of life in the Ancient Benin Kingdom. People didn’t write or draw, they told their life events and the stories of their culture through a strong tradition of storytelling. We think that story tellers were a combination of entertainers and historians who told stories to Edo villagers, probably at night-time and around a central village fire. The stories were fun although they might sometimes be scary. They usually took the form of a fable with a moral at the end. They also recorded and explained early Edo history.

Below is one of their stories about the creation of the world.

According to the story, in the beginning God created the world and everything in it. As he neared the end of his creation, he decided to send his sons to rule over the earth and asked them what they might need to do their job well. The eldest of the children chose great riches, the second child chose knowledge and wisdom, the third asked for understanding of the mysteries of the world, but the fourth and youngest child felt cheated. All that had been left for him was what appeared to be a tatty, dull snail shell containing nothing but sand.

The youngest son was disappointed with his choice and wondered about the wisdom of wasting his time and energy taking his gift but a hornbill bird appeared next to him and whispered to him, suggesting he would be wise to keep his gift. And so, armed with their gifts, the four sons clambered in to boats and set off for earth.

As their boats arrived on the place where Benin Kingdom used to be, they found that the world had been created only with sky and water. There was no land, nowhere for their boats to seek shelter or protection from storms. The sons rocked back and forth in their boats looking hopelessly for somewhere to land their boats. Suddenly the youngest son knew exactly what to do. He lifted is snail shell and carefully poured out the contents on to the ocean before him. As sand tumbled to the surface of the water, it solidified and dry land stretched out in front of him for miles.

As God watched his sons, he was so impressed by what had happened that he made the youngest son the king of Benin. The remaining brothers still had no place to berth their boats and so were forced to trade with the new King their gifts for land.